

Pete Stark's Legislative Report, Feb 2009

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PROTECTING CHILDREN'S HEALTH CARE

These tough economic times call for quick action. As workers are losing their health care and states are facing severe budget cuts, children are losing their health care. We must ensure that our government safety net programs protect these vulnerable children.

I am proud of how quickly Congress and the President have moved to ensure that millions of children still have health insurance. I was an original cosponsor of the Children's Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act (H.R. 2). This important legislation extends and expands the popular and successful State Children's Health Insurance Program (known as Healthy Families in California). The House and Senate both passed this legislation in January, and it was signed into law on February 4th, 2009.

CHIP will now provide health care to 11 million kids. Over four million of these children currently lack health insurance. The other seven million kids receive care through CHIP today, but would have lost that coverage if Congress hadn't acted to extend and improve the program.

This bill was originally passed by the last Congress, but twice vetoed by then- President Bush. With more than 9 million children who lack health insurance, the need to improve the program was vital then. Our economic crisis has made these improvements even more urgent.

Swift action on children's health care is another example of how Congress and the new Administration are working together to live up to our promise of change and to make real improvements in families' lives.

ENDING PAY DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

In his first days in office, the President has taken real strides toward gender equality by signing the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act into law. I am proud to have been an original co-sponsor of this bill.

This new law reverses a decision made by the Supreme Court in 2007, which strictly limited the rights of women to contest discriminatory pay. It is an important step to achieve eliminating the pay gap that exists between women and men. I look forward to continuing to work toward equal pay for equal work.

PRESERVING WORKERS' RIGHTS

I have always backed the right of workers to organize. I am proud to be an original co-sponsor of the Employee Free Choice Act, which will be introduced in the next few weeks. The bill curbs barriers to labor organizing and protects workers from intimidation, discrimination, or retaliation if they attempt to form a union.

Opponents of these important worker protections have stepped up their efforts in recent weeks, distorting the bill's provisions and lodging unfounded attacks. That is why I think it is important that you know what is in the bill, and what it will mean for working families in the East Bay and across the country.

The Employee Free Choice Act:

- Allows for the creation of a union if a majority of employees have signed written forms saying they wish to unionize (card check);
- Mandates mediation and arbitration for employers and unions during difficult contract disputes, so that employers cannot drag out the bargaining process;
- Requires stronger penalties against employers engaging in unfair labor practices while employees are attempting to organize or obtain a first contract; and
- Increases back pay awards for illegal discrimination that occurs during efforts to organize.

Critics say the Employee Free Choice Act would eliminate the secret ballot. That's just not true. Under current law, unions can organize by card check or election — whichever the employer approves. Under the Employee Free Choice Act, that choice would be up to the employees instead of the employer. If employees want a secret ballot, they can have it.

The right to organize is a fundamental right of working men and women, and it is critical that we support it during times of economic downturn. I will work with Congressional leaders to ensure the swift passage of the Employee Free Choice Act and protection for America's workers.

ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE

Last month, we heard from the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration that our carbon dioxide output is "irreversibly" damaging our environment and impacting climate change. We cannot wait to act on climate change.

On January 15, I introduced the Save Our Climate Act (H.R. 594), which creates a new tax on fossil fuels designed to decrease emissions and create immediate incentives for green energy. By placing a price on what we want less of — pollution — we can then relieve pressure on things we want more of — work, income, investment.

In my legislation, this tax is applied when these fossil fuels are initially removed from the ground, and increases each year. The level of taxation would freeze when carbon dioxide emissions have decreased by 80 percent from 1990 levels — the level of reduction scientists tell us is necessary to prevent the catastrophic consequences of rapid climate change.

A carbon tax is the best way to halt global warming because it can be implemented quickly without any new bureaucracy. Because it is simple and straightforward, a tax on carbon cannot be gamed or avoided by polluters and is less susceptible to manipulation by special interests.

Al Gore, author Thomas Friedman, and the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office all think that a carbon tax is the best way to combat climate change. With the Save Our Climate Act we can finally make a bold statement that the United States will lead the way in fighting this environmental crisis.

WORKING TOWARD MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Gaza recently suffered a significant number of civilian casualties from Israeli air and ground attacks. These attacks occurred in reaction to Hamas missile launches into Israel. I am deeply saddened by the killing and maiming of innocent civilians.

I remain committed to the peace process. If we are to end this conflict, the United States must embrace diplomacy and recognize that armed conflicts, like Hamas's rocket attacks and Israel's retaliatory incursion into Gaza, only incite violence in the future.

Israel must allow relief for the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza. On January 9th, I and other Members of Congress signed a letter to the then-current and incoming administrations, asking them to take immediate steps toward a lasting ceasefire and allowing sufficient humanitarian aid. I also signed a January 27th letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton,

urging the United States to take a leading role in alleviating the suffering of civilians in Gaza.

I am also opposed to Israel's blockade of Gaza, which is depriving its citizens of adequate resources for health services, water supply, sewage treatment and food production. This is a violation of basic human rights. I support the opening of all Gaza border crossings and removal of all Israeli troops from the Palestinian territories.

Ultimately, lasting peace will be built upon a working Palestinian economy and society.

SAVING CALIFORNIA'S WILDERNESS

The House will soon be considering legislation that will designate 2.1 million acres of wildlands throughout the nation as federally protected wilderness. The Omnibus Public Lands Management Act (S. 22) is the largest wilderness designation in 15 years. It was passed by the Senate in January and is expected to be the first environmental bill that President Obama signs into law.

The bill is particularly significant for California's environment. It will permanently protect over 735,000 acres of lands throughout the state, including 450,000 acres in the Southern and Eastern Sierra-Nevada and the area around White Mountain (California's third highest peak), and 190,000 acres in and around Joshua Tree National Park. In addition, 73 miles of California's rivers will receive protection as Wild and Scenic Rivers. Funding will also be provided for the restoration of the San Joaquin River and its historic salmon run.

Wilderness designation is the highest level of protection under federal law. Drilling, mining, logging, and the use of motorized vehicles, such as snowmobiles and fourwheelers, are banned. Hiking, camping, horseback riding, and fishing are all allowed, but the areas are managed to protect their natural character.

In a state like California with a growing population, it is essential that wild areas be set aside as havens for wildlife and as refuges that our children and grandchildren will be able to explore and discover. The Public Lands Management Act is truly historic legislation that represents a huge victory for our environment.